Fatalism and Nietzsche,

logic, time, in/determinism, free will, etc.

Jan Toorop, "Fatalism"

I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things; then I shall be one of those who makes things beautiful. *Amor fati:* let that be my love henceforth! I do not want to wage war against what is ugly. I do not want to accuse; I do not even want to accuse those who accuse. Looking away shall be my only negation. And all in all and on the whole: someday I wish to be only a Yes-sayer.

~ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 1882

A fatalist—if there is any such—thinks he cannot do anything about the future. He thinks it is not up to him what is going to happen next year, tomorrow, or the very next moment. He thinks that even his own behavior is not in the least within his power, any more than the motions of the heavenly bodies, the events of remote history, or the

political developments in China. It would, accordingly, be pointless for him to deliberate about what he is going to do, for a man deliberates only about such things as he believes are within his power to do and to forego, or to affect by his doings and foregoings.
~ Richard Taylor, "Fatalism," 1962

Fatalism links all these topics together…

Nietzsche's notion of amor fati

Nietzsche wrote of *amor fati* (the love of fate) as though it were a healthy psychological orientation toward the perceived inevitable. Mike Archbold will start us off by considering Nietzsche's subjective approach to fate. See his slides here: "Nietzsche: Will and Fatalism, a Tension."

Intro

Then we will discuss an account of the *objective* situation that *subjective* fatalism of the Nietzschean type, for example, is a reaction to: namely, the influential one put forward by Richard Taylor in 1962: the conclusion that fatalism best describes reality, no matter how we may or may not feel about it. This is known as "logical fatalism"—it is the view that "we are powerless to do anything other than what we actually do," and it appeals only to "logical laws and metaphysical necessities…"[1]

Along the way, we will untangle fatalism from determinism and its presuppositions and consequences. Fatalism and determinism are *not* the same. Fatalism is a simpler metaphysical idea involving certain basic "truths" of logic, time, and knowledge. It has a leaner metaphysics than determinism. Determinism complicates matters by requiring additional assumptions about the way the world is *independently* of our empirical limitations or rational capabilities. It posits extra layers of metaphysically lavish notions like materialism and "causation." Moreover, there is an interesting argument owing to Robert Holton suggesting that even if causal determinism is true, it may lose some of its mojo because its truth can be decoupled from any implications about the "predictability" of the future. Determinism, he argues, does *not* entail foreknowledge. In other words, determinism may accurately describe reality (assuming "causation" more enlightening than philosophers suspect it to be) while being rather useless to any project we may have.

Two philosophers on free will and determinism

1. SEP entry on "Fatalism" by Hugh Rice.

Part of the appeal of fatalism is its relative elegance. It is sparse in its assumptions about what there is and the way they work. If determinism's metaphysics is complicated by *causation*, that of free will is complicated by the metaphysics of *agency*.

David Hume three centuries ago cast suspicion on the notion of causation, suggesting we had no reason to think of it as anything but an induced psychological proclivity. Nature does to us what Pavlov did to his dog. What we actually experience is one damn thing after another with regularity. We call it causation. See this often enough and we abstract "natural laws" from the individual experiences. Causation is an organizing principle. Useful because of our environmentally tweaked evolution. Like a paperclip. How useful would a paperclip be if we had never developed hands?

And what are these things, these "agents," that exempt themselves from the laws that constrain everything else in the universe? (Or every *thought* about anything in the universe?) Are agents super dense concentrations of hubris?

The description fatalism offers of the universe owes nothing to these assumptions and problems they raise.

It is also important to say something about the *optional* relationship between pessimism or optimism to fatalism. Whether or not fatalism is a *viable* theory[2] objectively, the subjective attitudes of optimism and pessimism are only contingently associated with it...

Think fatalism and pessimism go together? Think again: consider Trump. He repeatedly identifies himself as a fatalist, and is and always has been certain he was destined for great things, and he is indefatigably optimistic that the rest of the world, too, will come to recognize this in time. Why else should America (or anything else) "be great"? (See articles in Resources below.)

And, finally, maybe (if not on this occasion on a subsequent one) we'll touch on ancient classical —and as Nietzsche called it, "joyful"—cynicism, from which, we think, he took inspiration. For Nietzsche—as for the classical cynics like Diogenes, Hipparchia, and Crates—to love fate is an imperative… We don't love fate because it is a lovable thing. We love it—if we love it—because we do not want to be embarrassed by our total powerlessness...

2. I emphasize "viable" because why should we assume that a "true" theory is *also* a viable one? "Viable" here meaning something we can *live* with. Why should truth align with anything useful to our survival?

Even whether you are a fatalist—or not—that, too, is fated. Admittedly, it is a suspiciously tidy theory, but the alternatives are so conceptually grungy...

Logical fatalism

There is an objective argument for the truth of what fatalism is a reaction to quite apart from whether a subjective orientation (such as Nietzsche's recommends) appeals to you or not. It involves only basic notions of truth, logic and time.

But, first, fatalism is *not* determinism. That's a different notion relying on at least one other philosophically troublesome concept, namely, causation. Fatalism is consistent with both determinism and its opposite, indeterminism. Determinism obviously is not. If the fatalist thesis correctly describes the nature of experience, then the convictions driving both determinism and free will are wholly psychological needs, if even that. Useful, perhaps, as coping mechanisms, but metaphysically idle. Truth, logic and time are more simple than the notion of causation, which assumes, in addition to these, an entire cosmos of the material.

Fatalism is not the same as determinism and it does not necessarily entail pessimism. It may spur and ground, as Nietzsche suggests, a psychological orientation, a natural or assumed reaction toward life events.

Or it can be held as a basic fact about the world irrespective of objective or subjective truth—as basic as a law of logic. Deny it at your own peril. Indeed, it can be held as tightly as a law of logic because it can be shown to be founded on little else but widely accepted conceptions of truth and time plus basic logic. Dismissing fatalism may entail dismissing a law of logic commonly taken as fundamental to rational thinking.

Under a common understanding of what it means for a statement to be true, *if* the statement is true in the present tense, then it must be true. You cannot say the opposite without contradicting yourself. You cannot *now* say you are not reading this. Or five minutes from *now* that you *did* not read it. But a fatalist believes this is *as* true of future statements as we agree it is about present and past statements. If they are true at any time, they cannot become false with the passage of time. If you come to learn that a statement you formerly regarded as true is false, that's because you mistook a falsity to be true in the first place, not because it was true and then somehow magically became false. If something *caused* a statement about a future event to become false, you were wrong to ever think it was true in the first place. If nothing *caused* a statement about a future event to become false, you were still wrong to ever think it was true in the first place. You were in error in your prediction, not that the statement changed its truth value. True statements don't become false. Or vice versa.

Note that we are *not* talking about the knowledge-state of any knower entertaining the truth or falsity of a statement. *Knowledge* of the truth value of a statement is a very different thing from the truth value of the statement. Knowledge implies a knower with contingent powers of knowing (except in the case of an omniscient being, if there is any such thing).

Truth, under one of the simplest definitions, is a correspondence between what a statement claims and a state of affairs external to the claim. The statement is true when what it claims corresponds with the state of affairs it refers to. False, when it doesn't.

If a statement describing a state of affairs is true now, then if you had expressed yesterday that this statement would hold true today, you would have been correct. Likewise if you make a statement now about some event tomorrow and it happens that we learn tomorrow that it is true, then it is true now that it will be true tomorrow. And if it will be true tomorrow, then it is true now to say it will be true tomorrow. And it would have been true a billion years ago had there been anyone around to say it then.

Time does not make statements true. *Their inevitability makes them true.* Time merely informs us of future truths when the future they describe becomes a "now." There is no logical way in which a true future statement could turnout not to be true. When the time ceases to be tomorrow and becomes a present or past statement, it will be true because it *always* was true, not because at one time it was not and then became true. Or that it is required that someone exist to *know* this truth. Likewise, if it turns out to be false, then it was *always* false. You were mistaken to think otherwise if you thought that way today—or at any time.

Knowledge of the truth or falsity of a statement is irrelevant to the truth or falsity of the statement. In making this claim we are relying only on two assumptions: one about the nature of truth and one about the laws that govern intelligibility of any statement, namely a basic law of logic or reasoning.

For example, suppose dinosaurs existed 67 million years ago. And that no dinosaur then existed who could formulate the proposition that "I, a dinosaur, exist." And so could not *know* they themselves existed. And further suppose that 66 million years ago an asteroid struck the earth and eliminated dinosaurs and indeed most life on earth. And thus none of our evolutionary ancestors survived, hence we never evolved, and the earth were today as barren of life as it appears Mars is. Under these circumstances, would propositions such as "once dinosaurs existed" and "an asteroid struck the earth at a certain moment in its history" be true?

Under one common conception of truth, the answer would be "yes." A statement's truth does not depend on there being anyone around to know its truth. (There are other stranger conceptions of

truth under which this, in fact, may *not* follow, but we'll return to those in a moment.)

Some assumptions made by the logical fatalist argument:

- A statement's truth value does not require cognitive appreciation.
- A statement's truth value *may or may not* be determined by prior events, but the passage of time, *by itself*, does not alter truth values. Time is not, *in itself*, efficacious.
- A statement's truth value—provided the statement is well-formed, that is, is grammatical and semantically able (i.e., not nonsense)—is either true or it is false. There is *no* third possibility. This is an ancient law of logic known as the law of excluded middle (*tertium non datur*). In other words, statements do not first appear as empty containers needing the passage of time to fill them with a truth value, like a drinking glass in a cupboard pre-exists empty and only awaits being filled with drink.

Ways to escape fatalism and their price

The *correspondence theory of truth* may be incorrect. The truth of a proposition may not always map onto anything in reality. A "true" future prediction may not refer to any future state of the world because these future states lack reality. Dumping this widely held theory of truth is one way to escape fatalism. But at what price?

Or, our *theory of time* may be off. Fatalism seems to assume what is called the block or "B" theory of time, in which past, present, and future events are all equally real and equally susceptible to being pinned down by a *true* proposition. But perhaps instead one or other version of the "A" theory of time is the correct one.

One version of the "A" theory, called the "partial block" theory of time, is one in which the past and present have reality, but not the future. The latter remains open or fluid until the present pins it down. The other more radical version of the "A" theory, "presentism," takes the present moment—and *only* the present moment—as the gold standard of reality: the past (through recent memory), and the future (through immediate anticipation) may partake of a *measure* of "reality" but this measure fades with distance in time from the present moment. Both the future and the past, to a presentist, look the way a path may appear to a near-sighted person without corrective lenses. Things emerge out of obscurity and into it again as time passes (or we move through it).

Or, suppose *the principle of bivalence*—which insists that every proposition must either be true or false but not both—is false. It makes no reference to past, present, or future statements. Some non-standard, non-Western logics, indeed, do permit *other* valences such as "indeterminate" or "neither" or even "both" as truth values. We can say of propositions describing future events that they are neither true nor false but indeterminate, for instance.

But dismissing the principle of bivalence has some strange consequences. It means, among other things, that if I had predicted yesterday that I would be writing this now it could have not been said *then* that the prediction is true. In fact, no prediction can ever be true *except* in hindsight. But what is the point of a prediction if you *always have to wait to see if it is true*. You can do that without making any predictions at all. What is the point of them? So will we have to dispense with a coherent concept of "prediction" to avoid fatalism?

There is a great deal to discuss here...

Resources

Nietzsche and fatalism
Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, author of *American Nietzsche: A History of an Icon and His Ideas*, in this video interview helps to dispel some myths about Nietzsche and as well as his impact on American culture broadly.

Alain de Botton from the School of Life presents Nietzsche's notion of amor fati in this video.

"Back to the Future. Peter Adamson looks back at ideas of eternal repetition." Peter Adamson, master historian of philosophy, here helps make clear how Nietzsche's notions of "eternal recurrence" and *amor fati* are related.

Logical fatalism, determinism, and free will
A good introductory lecture surveying the philosophical concepts of fatalism, determinism, and free will by Prof. Rami El Ali.

"Fate," by Richard Taylor (from *Metaphysics*, 2nd ed. 1974) is the classic modern exposition on the subject. See also the original more technical account, "Fatalism," in *The Philosophical Review* 1962. Taylor revived in contemporary analytic terms the ancient argument for fatalism found in (and rejected by) Aristotle.

"Fatalism and the Metaphysics of Contingency," M. Oreste Fiocco. In Steven M. Cahn & Maureen Eckert (eds.), *Freedom and the Self: Essays on the Philosophy of David Foster Wallace*. Columbia University Press. pp. 57-92 (2015). This essay is an excellent exposition and defense of Taylor's argument.

"Logical Fatalism with Alicia Finch." A podcast interview with Alicia Finch in which she explains in detail the argument for logical fatalism, its incompatibility with free will, and various

possible responses.

Despite the title "Metaphysics: The Problem of Free Will," Richard Holton in this short video presentation highlights an often ignored but serious *epistemological* problem for determinism. Maybe we don't have free will because determinism is true, but, if so, determinism may promise more than (it is commonly assumed) it can deliver: it *cannot* give us foreknowledge. His paper "From Determinism to Resignation; and How to Stop It" expounds on the problem in more detail.

"Fatalism," by Hugh Rice in the SEP surveys the problem and attempted solutions.

"Future Contingents," Andrea Iacona's entry in the IEP further explores some of the subtleties involved in the logic of fatalism.

Fatalism and psychological orientations

Contrary to popular opinion, fatalism and pessimism do not necessarily go together. Trump is the *optimistic* fatalist par excellence: "Beyond Narcissism, Trump's Other Personality Flaws Are Putting Americans at Risk. His obsession with revenge and his fatalism are endangering the nation." David Corn, *Mother Jones*, March 27, 2020. "Trump the relentless optimist: Pinning hopes on an economic rebound even amid virus. He takes a positive tone in face of a staggering death toll and unemployment." Jordyn Phelps, *ABCnews*, May 7, 2020.

Fate, time, and logical principles

See my previous writeup "fate, time, and the law of excluded middle" where the LEM and theories of time are dissected.

the philosophy club

Extended writeup for the topic hosted at
The Philosophy Club in October 2020
Accessible at Archive.org

– Victor Muñoz
Guanajuato / Seattle